

*Resources to Make a Difference*

**Mark 6:30-44; 8:1-10**

John Breon

Do you ever want to make a difference, but think you don't have what it takes? Do you want to serve God, but feel like you're too limited? Do you hear the church's mission—to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world—and think that job's too big? Do you feel like your needs or the needs around you are too great and that you lack the resources to make it through?

In these stories in Mark, we see Jesus dealing with some giant-sized needs. As we look at these accounts, I want us to see something of what God provides in Jesus, how Jesus can use what we give him, and what all this reveals about Jesus.

It seems significant that we have *two* accounts of Jesus feeding large crowds. To understand how significant let's look at the similarities and the differences in these stories.

In both accounts Jesus has *compassion* on the crowds. He genuinely cares for these people. Jesus sees the people's need. In the first story, he sees that they're like sheep with no shepherd—milling and wandering aimlessly. So he begins to teach them many things. Herod is a ruler, but he's no shepherd. The religious leaders aren't tending the sheep, but laying heavy burdens on them. And the people are flocking to Jesus. In the second story, Jesus sees that the people have nothing to eat, that they've been with him in this deserted place for three days and that some of them won't survive the long journey home if he sends them off hungry. So he provides food for them.

In both accounts the disciples wonder how the crowds can be fed. In chapter 6 they figure if the people hurry, they can get to the surrounding towns and buy food. They actually say, "Send the people away." In chapter 8, they simply wonder where in that deserted place anyone could get food. Mark shows the disciples not only as models for following Jesus, but also as dull and often failing to understand Jesus.

In both stories Jesus expects the disciples to give the people something to eat. And when they scrounge together what little food they can, he uses it to feed the crowds. Jesus takes the loaves and fish, blesses or gives thanks, and breaks the loaves. Then he gives them to the disciples who give them to the people.

And a miracle happens. These meager resources are multiplied to meet everyone's need. In both stories, the people "all ate and were filled." And in both stories, disciples gather up basketfuls of leftovers.

Mark must have had a reason for including two such similar stories. The unique aspects of each account help us see why both are important.

In chapter 6, the feeding of the 5,000, the action seems to take place in Jewish territory in Galilee. Jesus acts as the shepherd of Israel like Moses or David. The parallels with Moses are interesting. Jesus provides bread for people in the wilderness just as God provided manna for the Israelites when Moses led them through the wilderness. Jesus teaches the people like Moses did. Jesus organizes the people into groups in a way similar to how Moses organized the Israelites.

Jesus is here fulfilling the role of the longed-for King of Israel, the Messiah who, like Moses, teaches the people and feeds them.

In this account the disciples gather *twelve* baskets of leftovers. Twelve is often associated with Israel because of the twelve tribes. This story shows Jesus supplying the divine provision for Israel promised in the Old Testament. And these twelve baskets are small, lunch-box sized. This is a picture of perfect provision, with just a little left over.

The account in chapter 8 is set across the Sea of Galilee in gentile territory. And it's in the context of stories about Jesus' ministry among Gentiles (non-Jews).

This second episode, when Jesus feeds 4,000, doesn't refer to the OT hope for a shepherd of Israel. Like the first feeding, this one takes place in a desert or uninhabited area. This may be intended to remind us of OT passages where God's future salvation is seen as a new miracle in the desert and others that describe God as providing miraculous abundance in a desert place (Isaiah 43:19-20; 35:1, 6; 51:3).

Another important detail is the phrase at the end of 8:3—many of the people had come from *a great distance*. That could be translated “from afar,” a phrase used in the OT to describe gentile areas.

The word used for “giving thanks” in chapter 8 is a different word than in chapter 6. Here it’s *eucharisto*, which also refers to the Eucharist or Holy Communion.

In this story the disciples gather up *seven* baskets of leftovers. I wonder if they looked like the Easter baskets full of eggs the kids had last week. Seven was a number sometimes associated with the Gentiles. The emphasis is on abundance. The word for basket here refers to a large basket, instead of the smaller lunch baskets in the first story. These large baskets are the kind that Paul got in when he escaped from Damascus. Some friends put him in a basket and lowered him out the city wall to get away from persecutors (Acts 9:25). Seven big baskets full of leftovers shows God’s abundant provision.

All of these details indicate that these stories do more than show that Jesus had power to multiply a little bit of food to feed a crowd. They certainly do demonstrate Jesus’ power. But Mark probably also wants us to see some other truths as well.

We can see that the feeding of the 5,000 shows Jesus bringing salvation to Israel. The feeding of the 4,000 anticipates that his salvation will reach others as well. The people of God will expand to include Gentiles. The church has a worldwide mission. And God provides miraculously and abundantly for that mission.

We’re included in that mission. We’re part of the people of God because of that outreach. And now we’re called to include others in the experience of God’s kingdom and salvation.

Now let’s look at another way these events apply to us. What about the needs we face? We all have things in our lives we’re trying to deal with. We may be trying to have a positive influence on someone. Or we want to help someone who’s struggling. Or we want to serve God. But our resources seem meager. What do we have to offer? The church ought to be a witness of God’s ability to provide for God’s people.

Can we confess that too often when we see people in need, we think, like the disciples, "Send them away"? We don't think we have enough to give. We don't have the time or the money or whatever else is needed. It's hard to get deeply involved in the situations of needy people. I'm surely not the only one who struggles with these feelings.

But Jesus said to the disciples, and he says to us, "What do you have?" Like the disciples, we often have to say, "Not much."

"Bring it," Jesus says. As we bring it and give it to Jesus, he leads us to thank God and reminds us that God is the one who provides what we need. He blesses what we bring and touches it with his miraculous power. And what we thought wasn't enough makes a difference. It meets a need.

When someone is sick and suffering, what do we have to give? When someone is facing a terrible loss in their life and they need comfort, what do we have? When someone needs to hear a Christian witness, they want to know about God, what can we offer? If God calls the church to start a new ministry, do we have what we need to do it? With all the construction around us, this neighborhood is going to get busy. What do we have to offer the new people who will be all around us? Do we have what's needed to welcome them, bless them, and share the faith with them?

If you look at what you have and say, "It's not much," Jesus still says, "Bring it. Give it. Let God use it."

I once heard about a pastor named Rob Blackburn. He told about a Sunday School teacher he had growing up. Her name was Mrs. Sappington. She taught a class of ninth grade boys who were determined not to be interested in anything the teacher said. She felt like she didn't have the resources she needed to teach young people. She didn't drive an impressive car. She didn't wear the right clothes to impress ninth graders. She didn't speak in their vocabulary. But she had a living faith and she cared about the boys and she liked them.

One day, another woman, who didn't like teenagers, came down the hall to their room to quiet the boys down. Mrs. Sappington met her at the door and said, "Aren't these fine boys?" And they said, "All right, Mrs. Sappington."

Rob decided that if she could give what she had, he could too (Jim Buskirk, tape, Fin and Feather, 10/14/89).

Think of the people you've known who've invested their time and energy and caring and prayers in the lives of others—in your life. And think how God blessed that and used it to bring people into his kingdom, to make a difference in their lives. The people I've known who've had the greatest influence on others are people who give themselves. They invest their time and energy and love in the lives of other people. Often they do it in ordinary, humble, almost unnoticed ways. They may not even be aware of the influence they're having. But God takes what they give and uses it to bless others.

I've had people like that all through my life. The teachers who had the biggest impact on me were those who gave more than just information. I quote Bob Tuttle a lot. He was a professor at ORU who invested himself in the lives of his students. He made us feel like we were important, that we mattered. Another of my seminary professors was an Irishman named Billy Abraham. At Perkins he invested himself in the lives of many students, not just in class, but personally and in an evening worship time. He didn't have a lot of time to spare, but one year he spent an evening a week with a group of students. We sang and studied the Bible and prayed for and with each other. It was a great time to be refreshed, to learn and to explore our gifts for ministry.

My dad used to talk about just doing what needs to be done. And he would serve on church committees. He taught Sunday School and started new classes a time or two. He'd step in and help with youth sometimes. He would go visit people and invite them to church. It was all pretty low key, not calling attention to himself.

In every church I've served there have been people like that. There's not a lot of fanfare. They just give their time and effort and resources to do what needs to be done to help the church's ministry. They help other people without expecting something in return. Maybe they teach Sunday School. Maybe they serve as greeters. Maybe they go visit people to express the church's welcome and care. Maybe they pray for the church's

ministry. You know people like that. You are people like that. And God uses you to make a difference.

What do you have? Not much? A lot? Bring it. Give it. Let God use it.

In John's Gospel, in the story of feeding 5,000, a little boy gives the loaves and fish for Jesus to multiply. There's a great Gospel song that tells his story and calls us to do the same.

Just ordinary people  
God uses ordinary people  
He chooses people just like me and you  
Who are willing to do what he commands  
He chooses people who will give him all  
No matter how small your all may seem to you  
Because little becomes much  
When you place it in the Master's hand

Just like that little lad  
Who gave Jesus all he had  
How the multitude was fed  
With the fish and loaves of bread  
What you have may not seem much  
But when you yield it to the touch  
Of the Master's loving hand  
Then you will understand  
How your life will never be the same

(Danniebelle Hall)

And Jesus is the Master. There's one more thing we need to see in these miraculous meals. Look at what they tell us about who Jesus is.

In the episodes following both feedings we see the disciples not understanding something very important about these miracles of Jesus. They missed Jesus revealing himself as the Shepherd of Israel and the Lord of the nations, the One that God had sent bringing salvation. In Jesus, the Lord God comes to us and gives himself to us. He provides what we really

need. He shows the abundance of his love and mercy and grace. He satisfies our hungry hearts when we take the gift he offers.

In 8:11-13, some Pharisees also fail to see Jesus for who he is. They demand him to give them a sign from heaven. He refuses because they've refused to believe, or to see all the wonders he's already done as signs of who he is.

The point for us is we mustn't have hard hearts, but we have to see Jesus for who he is and grasp his significance. We'll realize that though we are ordinary and limited, we serve a mighty Lord. When we trust him, amazing things happen.

Jesus took and blessed and broke and gave and gave and gave.

At the Cross, he does the same. In the Holy Spirit, he gives and gives and gives himself. And he gives life and peace and love and joy.

He takes our commitments, he takes us, and through us he gives and gives and gives so that we're not only blessed, but we become a blessing.